BORCK

By BRUNO E. WERNER

In our series of modern short stories, we now present the translation of a story written by a well-known German author who is also the editor of the literary magazine "Die Neue Linie." The story tells of a time when the people of Europe, after the extraordinary and indelible experience of the Great War, were trying to find their way back to everyday life.—K.M.

THERE was nothing remarkable about Borck as he stood behind the counter of the travel bureau, explaining the shortest connection to Rome or Bucharest to a would-be traveler with the aid of railway guides and a map mounted on cardboard, on which the word "Berlin" had become illegible through the touch of many fingers. He looked no different from any of the many young men who stood at that time behind counters and grilles, bent over accounts, or pushed handcarts, and from the appearance of all of whom one could scarcely have told that, only a few years previously, they had borne the responsibility for the lives and deaths of dozens or hundreds of men. In this everyday life there was little room for their virtues and none for their faults which, out there, may perhaps have been virtues. In their new positions the best among them did not care to be reminded of the fact that they had stormed the trenches at the Somme, had lain in the water of Flanders in an artillery barrage, had fought in Palestine, had been nicked by a bullet on the banks of the Narev, or had spent a winter in an ice cave in the Dolomites. Such memories did not fit into this life, when Mr. Knottek called one into his office at five o'clock in the evening and, indicating a slip of paper, said: "Fourteen marks sixty, Mr. Borck, and not eleven marks sixty, as you calculated. We shall deduct it from your salary, but please don't let it happen again!"

However, the fact that he was sent one day in February to the branch office in Frankfurt, provided with expense money and a second-class ticket, revealed that he had been so discreet about his former capacity of shock-troop leader in a German infantry regiment that his firm had some confidence in him by now. It was strange: on this line, which he had traveled so often on the way to his regiment in France, his new life fell from him like an artificial skin. Of course, he no longer looked as he had done in the old days, with his long gray coat, tilted cap, and turned-up red collar, when the brigade commander had come up to him and said: "You have a good head. Stay with us when this shindy is over." Nor did he still have that narrow, boyish face. But, much more than after office when he usually went home by subway to the furnished room he rented from the major's widow, he felt now in the train that he was again Lieutenant Borck, a free man and his own master, who—although in the opposite direction—was going home on leave from the western front.

Just before the train started, a woman got into the compartment. She was closely wrapped in a fur coat and spoke to a man on the platform whom Borck could not see. Borck, who was engrossed in a book, did not pay any attention to her at first. But after the train had been moving a little while he was agreeably surprised to discover that she was young, with big blue eyes, fair hair, and an upper lip that was a little too short and showed her teeth, as if her

mouth were always forming a surprised question.

It was at this moment that the girl looked at him thoughtfully and said suddenly with a smile: "Well, are you going to Switzerland too?"

His amazement vanished when he found out that he had sold her a ticket to Lausanne the day before. Borck felt embarrassed at being reminded here, where he was free, of his workaday world, from which he could not get away. It seemed as if the girl had felt something of his displeasure and, at the same time, the reason for it, for she obviously tried to make amends. As sometimes happens with warmhearted, spontaneous people, in her effort she jumped, so to speak, an octave too high: "I am terribly glad to see you again here, Mr. —"

"Borck," Carl said with a laugh. "You have a good memory for the slaves of the workaday world," and was annoyed with himself for having used such an affected expression.

Whether the stars over the lives of these two people had entered the same constellation at this moment, or whether the uncurbed swiftness of their acquaintanceship was the cause — after a few hours each knew as much about the other as most people, and especially Borck, would have needed days to find out. He knew that she was called Ellen, that her mother was American, that she lived with her parents and helped her father in his consulting room, that she had been very ill and had now been sent off for a four-weeks' skiing holiday in Switzerland, that she was often very sad and sometimes, when she was alone in her room in the evening, knelt in her armchair and cried with her face pressed against its back, and finally that there was a man in her life.

Borck caught himself following the contours of her face which stood out against the light background of the window and thinking that her head looked like a note of incredibly sweet music dancing between the rising and falling parallel lines of the telegraph wires. He thought of his year with Elizabeth and that there had never been such a strange, vibrating thrill between them as between him and this utterly unknown creature who was now pressing the tip of her nose against the windowpane so that the breath of her half-open mouth appeared on the window like a little flower.

When they were sitting in the dining car, he caught himself out once again and was alarmed at himself. She was writing a postcard, and in his mind's eye he saw the man for whom it was intended. To counteract his ill-humor, he was trying to imagine him as a corpulent, middle-aged official.

"My people have asked me to send a card from Frankfurt to say whether I have had a good journey so far," said the girl thoughtfully, stroking the narrow bridge of her nose with the little finger of her left hand. She raised her glass: "I think we are having a good journey!"

Borck understood, and the glasses tinkled as they touched, while the train rattled along in a steady, reassuring rhythm. Frankfurt, thought Borck, the branch office, Scheppken the manager, the new turnover quota, the crediting system of the government railway, the Berlin office, the sandwiches wrapped by his landlady, the major's widow ("Mr. Borck, I know you like liver sausage!"), the subway, the cash slips and the customers, Miss Rost from the shipping department who was so fond of chatting with him, the restless queue of travelers in front of the counter, the domineering tone of the bank manager's wife who wants to go to the seaside with her four children, the ring of the telephone, the gray masses on the street, the drab

melancholy on yellow-lit, winter Sunday afternoons, the whole repulsiveness of this life which he had sworn hundreds of times every year to give up but to do which he had always lacked the courage — for in war he knew where he stood, but only others could swim in this kind of a life.

"I am going as far as Basel," Borck suddenly said out loud, and he was glad that he had not told the girl his destination before.

SHORTLY after Frankfurt the light had been turned on in the compartment. The girl drew up her legs on the seat and leaned against the window corner. Borck lit a cigarette for her. Outside, lights flew past, red and green, and sometimes a signalman's house hissed by.

"I shall be afraid when you get out," said the girl, "I'm always like that when I am alone at night." He noticed how she turned her head away.

In an hour we shall be in Basel, he thought, and said aloud: "Shall I go with you as far as Lausanne?" Her head spun round, and he saw with alarm that there were tears in her eyes.

"Of course I shall go on to Lausanne. We get free trips through the travel bureau." He was lying, but she looked grateful, like a schoolgirl, and held out her hand to him. Borck was conscious of her slender wrist and, as he bent over it, of a delicate perfume. Orange blossom, Borck thought, inwardly smiling at his disquiet. The train rattled on, calumdrumdrum, calumdrumdrum.

In Lausanne the early morning sun was shining from a cloudless sky. Borck went in to the telegraph office and reported to Berlin: "*Ill. Request fortnight leave.*" He imagined the faces in the travel bureau. Knottek would point with his fat little finger at the place of despatch, Lausanne, and shake his head and say with affected sarcasm: "Seems to have gone slightly out of his mind, our Mr. Borck!" Here we go, thought Borck, in future someone else will have to sell their tickets; I can last out three months, to hell with this dog's life!

When he came out, he saw the girl standing among the trunks. He was whistling his old regimental march between his teeth and felt gloriously young and silly.

"Everything is fixed up," he called out to her, "I'm coming with you, if I may." The girl said nothing, linked her arm in his and, for a moment, pressed his arm against her side.

THOSE were the sixteen hours in which Carl Borck lost his civilian job. What followed, took place as real love stories usually take place, that is to say, it was not in the least extraordinary but wonderful and grand; and Borck knew that these were hours such as he had not known since the crossing of the Marne, with the only difference that now there was not that disagreeable feeling in his stomach: instead there was a glorious floating sensation, like being near the heaven of the gods, a new existence— from now on everything would be different.

ONE morning during the third week of their stay in the little winter resort, Ellen had appeared at breakfast with a white face, holding a telegram in her hand. "He is coming this evening," she had said, in a low, small voice, sadly, as if something inevitable was coming.

So this is the man who wants to take her away from me and whom she loved till now, Borck had thought.

But now the three of them had already been skiing together for three days, and the man was none other than Lance Corporal Schlieffen from his platoon, a student of law and a crazy fellow. Borck had nicknamed him 'General' Schlieffen since the time when, on patrol, he had wiped out a Tommy who was aiming at Lieutenant Borck.

'General' Schlieffen, of a well-to-do family, now an assistant professor at a university in north Germany, turned up,

with ruddy cheeks, healthy, athletic, and a little naïve, a characteristic which in the old days had prevented his being sent to an officers' training camp. For once during the visit of a division commander to the trenches, this front-line soldier had held out a pair of field glasses and asked: "Wouldn't you like to see some Frenchmen too, General?" As the division commander was a very lofty personage who should have been addressed as "His Excellency," he had looked the lance corporal over from head to foot but, when he discovered his Iron Cross, had turned away with a smile. His aide-de-camp, however, had taken Borck aside and remarked: "Excellent platoon, my dear fellow, but slightly lacking in manners for such an occasion." So 'General' Schlieffen with his Iron Cross and three other decorations gaily remained a lance corporal, and, after all, it was quite a good thing, for in this way the two of them had stayed together.

In the hall of the hotel, Schlieffen had loudly clicked his heels and shouted: "Good evening, Lieutenant!" and the two of them would have got drunk that same evening if Ellen had not sat between them, Ellen with her blue eyes, her narrow little nose, and her slightly too short upper lip. Schlieffen had not noticed what had happened, and he overwhelmed her with such a flood of affectionate warmth and sparkling wit that she beamed at him with big eyes, and it seemed for a moment as if the three happiest people in the world were sitting here.

On the morning of the third day Ellen and Borck had climbed up alone on their skis toward Mont Lachaux. Since Schlieffen's arrival, Borck had treated her simply as a winter-sports companion. When they took off their skiing clothes at the summit, however, and lay down together in the sun in bathing suits on their skis, Borck thought of Schlieffen and had a vision of a duel between two friends. He turned his head and tried to kiss the girl's ear, that tiny pink spot that was not covered by sunburn cream. He sensed that the little ear was drawing away from under his lips and, with a jerk, he turned his head back.

Through his green glasses he looked at the sun, which hit his eyes as a painful black spot, and said: "You love him?"

Instead of answering, the girl began to sob, so that, with the helplessness men feel toward weeping women and children, he tried to comfort her, without being very successful.

Then they sped down into the valley on their skis, Borck ahead. Just before they reached the hotel, she called out to him: "Carl!" Borck waited till she had caught up with him. She took his hand and pressed it very hard against her side. It was like that time at the station at Lausanne.

In the evening she did not appear in the dining room. She sent a message to say she was tired and that the two of them should eat alone.

Borck and Schlieffen had dinner at a round table. Between them there was the empty place.

"Borck, you old war horse, what's the matter with you?" said Schlieffen.

"Sunburn," replied Borck, "damn it!" He noticed that Schlieffen was looking at him out of the corner of his eye.

After dinner they drank a bottle of Neuchâtel in the small paneled bar.

"You're fond of Ellen," observed Schlieffen. "I don't know what there is between you. I just want to tell you I haven't called officially on her parents yet to ask for her hand."

"I am not at all interested how you two have arranged things," said Borck and was immediately ashamed of this remark and his unfriendly tone.

"I think we are going to get married in the spring," Schlieffen went on. "She will be the wife of a 'general' and, what's more, of a professor. For two years I have been working only for her and now I'm going to be offered a professorship at Kiel. Let's drink to her health!"

He lifted up his glass. Borck followed his example, but when he set down the glass the stem broke, and a red stream shot out over the table top.

"What on earth—?" said Schlieffen.

Borck replied: "I know I'm being a swine, *mon brave*, but I'm in love with her!"

Borck was obviously drunk, and young Schlieffen stared into his glass. Borck saw his big blue eyes begin to swim. The waiter came and wiped up the wine with a napkin. They had to stop talking. When he had gone, Borck said:

"Dear old chap, let me still call you 'General.' I can't simply leave the field here; there is more to it now than a little winter-sports affair. A damn sight more, and perhaps everything! It's something like at the Ferme Rochelle. There you either got into the English trenches, or you were finished. You couldn't go back. There was nothing but water there."

After a while Schlieffen raised his head and said tonelessly: "And what about her?"

During this second, as he said himself later, a great deal passed through Borck's mind, his whole life and perhaps even more, before he answered: "She loves us both."

The men sitting at the table were silent then, perhaps for an hour, till Schlieffen said: "One of us leaves tonight!"

"A duel, my dear Schlieffen, is a stupid thing," was Borck's weary response.

"I agree," said Schlieffen. "In the old days we shot at corks, and, apart from Lieutenant Borck, I was the only one who could hit five in a row." He smiled and added: "To shoot each other would be ridiculous and in bad taste. You can't fight your way for three years through the mud, shoulder to shoulder, to end up afterwards in a movie."

"The gods must decide," Borck answered, "the same gods who decided that time when we two took cover together in the ammunition dump during that nasty artillery barrage. We said to each other that an ammunition dump blows up less often than a man gets killed, and we came through it, while half of the platoon was gone."

"Dice!" said Schlieffen. "Waiter, the dice box!" called Borck and counted out matches on the table. Then he interrupted his counting and shook out the whole box. There were forty-five matches, more, far more than they had ever staked during the war when they diced for a risky patrol.

The dice rattled. The ash tray filled up with smoking cigarettes, and both men emptied one glass after another. Schlieffen jumped up once and opened a window. Outside a fine rain was drizzling on the snow. They played vingt-et-un, razzle-dazzle, quinze, multiplication, Plietzschke. Plietzschke was a crazy game they had invented at Péronne. You had to toss the dice in the air and quickly catch it after turning around the dice box. Plietzschke was a bugler who had fallen at Warneton. He always carried a dice box with him, and so they had buried him back there at Comines with the leather box in his pocket.

"Plietzschke was a real man," said Borck, "worth more than both of us together and the whole damn set-up today. Let's drink to Bugler Plietzschke

of the second company!" For an instant Borck saw before him the little bugler who was never without his polished instrument and his dice box. He was a farm boy from Silesia, teased and loved by all because of his curious dialect.

By now the room was empty. The waiter, who had gone to bed, had thoughtfully placed a row of bottles on the table. The empty ones were rolling around on the floor. The clock stood at five. Schlieffen had a pile of matches and slowly drew a circle around it with his finger. Borck had been successful and had only six matches left. But now he lost and suddenly had eighteen. The hand of the clock was moving onto the six.

Suddenly Schlieffen placed eighteen matches in the middle. Borck followed his example. "Let's get it over. Sudden death," said Schlieffen, and Borck noticed that he clenched his jaw. At that moment the clock wheezed as it started to strike. Borck picked up the dice box. On the sixth stroke he tilted it on the table. The dice showed nine spots—what they had called a 'grand slam' at the front.

Borck stared at his victory. When the clock struck again, he got up. The short hand was pointing at seven. The chair opposite was empty. A charwoman looked curiously into the smoke-filled room. Borck was no longer drunk. He felt miserable. He went to Schlieffen's room. It was empty, the luggage gone. Borck ran down the three floors. Downstairs he found the night porter.

"Mr. Schlieffen has paid his bill and left for the station in the hotel sleigh."

The 'general' had left without saying another word to Borck. "Good-night," Borck said to himself and went to his room.

In his sleep he heard a drop falling at regular intervals onto the tin of the window ledge. The drop tortured him, and the night seemed to last for ever, as if a big, damp, black dog were sitting on his chest and would not release him.

THREE hours later, when he entered the breakfast room, the girl was sitting at the table and called out: "Hallo, you lazybones!"

She seemed to have forgotten the day before, and her red jersey radiated a shining glow over her young face, like an open fireplace. Borck wanted to lift his cup, but put it down again and said, with as quiet a tone as he could manage: "He had to leave suddenly. He'll write to you."

He heard his voice sounding quite hoarse. The girl slowly put her cigarette on a saucer, and he could see the blood leaving her face as she said softly: "What happened between you?"

Later, when Borck wanted to tell one of his friends about this and the following day, he did not go on. For several minutes he drummed with his fingers on the arm of the chair, and he only said that it had been the worst forty-eight hours of his life. They had tried over and over again to forget the other man. Borck had gone out with her into the forest, but the rain had dripped down from the branches and had left countless little gray holes in the snow, as if even the elements were conspiring against them.

In the afternoon he went to the café with her. They were alone there, and he had kissed her, but she suddenly jumped up and ran out. He looked for her all over the village, on the ski slope, in the hotel lounge where the music was playing, ghostly with its chattering guests, its clattering spoons and cups. Nor was she in her room. She finally appeared for a silent dinner, and after the meal she said good-night to him with a sad smile.

The following morning he came down to breakfast with a hollow feeling of uneasiness, but she suddenly behaved again as if nothing had happened. She laughed and talked a lot and avoided anything that might have reminded her of Schlieffen. In this way the day passed, almost like the days before Schlieffen's arrival, and between them

there was once again that sensation of floating, of vibration, that wonderful harmony he had never known till then. But on the way home in the evening she suddenly ran ahead into the hotel, and he had dinner alone. Still, he believed that everything would perhaps turn out all right after all.

During the night, however, he was awakened by the flapping of his curtain when his door opened slowly. She came in and quickly hung her fur coat over the chair. He did not stir. She lay down in her pajamas beside him on top of the covers, took his head, kissed him, and suddenly burst into tears, so that he had to hold her little body very tightly in his arms, so wildly was it racked by sobs. To his repeated questions, she finally said that she was in love with Schlieffen and that she could not go on living. It was only now that he felt, and gradually with growing certainty, that his victory at dice, of which he had told her nothing—for how was a woman to understand such things?—had been a defeat, and that he had really and truly lost her through Schlieffen's departure.

We do not know what Borck and the girl said to each other during this night. He only said later that he consoled Ellen and said to her that she should go ahead and join the 'general,' because he needed her, that she should take the first train in the morning, and that he would leave at noon. And then the girl had sometimes laughed through her tears at the funny things he had told her about and had asked him for his short English pipe as a memento. She had put her slender nose to the brown, smokey wood and had said that this was he, Carl, and that he would now always be with her.

In the morning they packed her trunks in Ellen's room. Outside a tinkling sleigh was waiting in the frost. The sun was shining brightly. They drove to the station on the gently twisting road. It all went very fast. Ellen got into the train. The conductor whistled, the carriages started to move. Borck trotted along beside them. When he saw that the girl, as she leaned out of the window, suddenly opened her mouth in fear—just like the little Frenchman who had lain in his dugout with gas poisoning—he abruptly turned on his heel and went back slowly to the hotel. The sun was hot. In his room he closed the shutters and turned on the electric light. In the big armchair, where a few hours before her coat had lain, he found his pipe.

EIGHT years later, Ellen Schlieffen was visited by a university colleague of her husband's, who had just returned from a botanical expedition to the Upper Amazon. He told her about a German settler, a sunburnt, muscular pioneer, whom he had found deep in the heart of Brazil, clearing the forest with some other Germans and a group of natives. He had spent the night in the settler's house, and when he had mentioned that he was from Kiel, the settler, whose name he could not remember, asked him to deliver a package to Mrs. Schlieffen. Unfortunately, the professor had later on lost part of his baggage, including this parcel, in a mishap on the rapids. But he hoped Mrs. Schlieffen would not mind the loss of the package too much, since it had probably only been intended as a joke: it had contained an old pipe.

The things that are really for thee gravitate to thee. You are running to seek your friend. Let your feet run, but your mind need not. If you do not find him, will you not acquiesce that it is best you should not find him? For there is a power, which as it is in you, is in him also, and could therefore very well bring you together, if it were for the best.

Emerson